

“Our conversations always were serious”

John Powell

Peter Erb, ed., *The Correspondence of Henry Edward Manning and William Ewart Gladstone: The Complete Correspondence 1833-1891*, 4 vols. (Oxford UP, 2012), 2,208 pp., \$600.00 cloth.

Eight years ago David Bebbington mentioned in passing that the Manning-Gladstone correspondence was “about to be published.”¹ This was indeed good news. Given the lofty positions of the correspondents – Gladstone as prime minister (1868-74, 1880-85, 1886, 1892-94) and Manning as Archbishop of Westminster (1865-92) and Cardinal (from 1875) – their letters were naturally important and much anticipated. Their idiosyncratic personalities and a famous public falling out over Manning’s conversion to the Roman Catholic Church in 1851 also brought a curious emotional dimension to this record of high governmental and ecclesiastical politics. As the years passed without result, however, those familiar with the vexed history of the letters wondered if Erb’s edition might not be our Father Kent’s *Life of Cardinal Manning* (“at press” in 1906). But I have seen an advance copy of *The Correspondence of Henry Edward Manning and William Ewart Gladstone*, and can report that the project is virtually complete.

The result is brilliant. The coverage is complete and the scholarship immense. All extant letters are included, supported by footnotes, documents, and related correspondence that together create an incredibly rich theological and cultural landscape. As a reference work alone, the set is worth the cost. Biographies of principal figures, many now little known, are fulsome; the details of arcane circumstances are consistently full and suggestive; identification and discussion of works read by Manning and

Gladstone is extensive; and quotations from passages in related correspondence with other principals abound. The roles of John Henry Newman, E.B. Pusey, Robert and Samuel Wilberforce, James Hope, Ignaz von Döllinger, Lord Granville, Catherine Gladstone, Mary Stanley, and a host of others, are noted, substantiated, and contextualized. Where quotes and extracts seem insufficient, Erb provides complete letters and documents in addenda to each section. Thus, for the critical period of the Gorham controversy and Manning's conversion to Rome, he supplements the correspondence with: a letter from Manning to Hope on the effects of the Hampden and Gorham decisions (23 January 1850); the Declaration of the Scottish Bishops and the printed circular of the Bishop of Glasgow (March 1850); a letter from Manning to Robert Wilberforce on Gladstone's proposed "engagement" (22 May 1850); Gladstone's letter to the Bishop of London (16 July 1850); the text of various resolutions considered by Manning and Gladstone regarding the Gorham decision (February 7, March 12, March 16, and the one eventually published in the *Times* on March 20); the Manning, Robert Wilberforce, and W.H. Mill Declaration of July 1850 and the printed circular response from John Keble, Pusey, and Charles Marriott; Manning's treatise on the Gorham decision of August 1850; and Manning's letter of resignation to the Bishop of Chichester (23 October 1850). For good measure, the contents of the addenda are annotated. In his coverage of the Vatican controversy, Erb goes further still, including in an appendix to volume four the complete texts of three lengthy pamphlets: Gladstone's *The Vatican Decrees and their Bearing on Civil Allegiance* (1874) and *Vaticanism: An Answer to Reproofs and Replies* (1875), and Manning's *The Vatican Decrees in their Bearing on Civil Allegiance* (1875); and a bibliography of 53 related articles, pamphlets, and books published in the England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, the United States, Italy, France, Germany, Belgium, and Spain during 1874-75. An edition of this magnitude could only have been produced by a scholar with an intimate knowledge of Church history (Anglican and Roman Catholic), classical and modern European languages, Victorian culture, and governmental and ecclesiastical high poli-

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tics. Erb, too, brings the personal experience of one who has traversed much of the same theological ground himself, having converted from the Mennonite faith of his youth to Roman Catholicism late in life.

The content is as extraordinary as the edifice, and broadly important. Volumes three and four cover the period when Manning and Gladstone were at the height of their powers (1861-92), and deal substantially with some of the largest European issues of the day, including Italian unification, the condition of Ireland, and the Vatican controversy. Though these letters are almost uniformly marked by a reticence engendered by the misunderstanding and disappointment surrounding Manning's conversion, they are habitually honest. What one sometimes misses in detail and rhetoric is made up for in a tense suggestiveness that forces the reader to abandon any simple characterizations regarding their feelings. Consider the first letters exchanged between the two men after almost a decade of estrangement:

15 March 1861

My dear Manning

When I met you yesterday it was an impulse of nature which made me say 'I should like to see you' and drew from you a very kind answer – It was not that I had anything to say. Alas I see nothing but what we have lost, & what we have not to say. But if you will come and see me perhaps we shall find something. I should like to know what hour suits you. About half past two any day except next Monday I am *free*: (of course I do not mean Sundays)....

Aff[ectiona]tely yours

W.E. Gladstone

16 March 1861

My dear Gladstone,

We are both men who seldom act without a reason, & the cause why I said so pointedly, let me hear from

you, was because I did not gather from our last letters some eight years ago that it was your wish that we should meet.

I need not say that I am not changeful in friendships: but I feel that there are more governing reasons than natural feelings....

Believe me, always
Affect[ionate]ly yours
H.E. Manning

What does Gladstone mean to suggest when he reports that he has nothing to say? What does Manning intend to convey by recognizing that they both “seldom act without a reason”? Is this simply a polite exchange following a chance encounter, or is there a wish on one or both parts for reconciliation? There is a strange affection at work here.

The best and most numerous letters, however, were written between 1840 and 1851, when Gladstone and Manning were together defending the Church of England, and both were perplexed about their course of action. These, like most great records of epistolary friendship, are compelling at several levels. They reveal in uncommon measure the minds of two scholastics, their modes of testing and developing arguments, and the means by which two supremely pious, honest, and ambitious men personally reconciled these sometimes discordant qualities as they sifted the claims of intellectual rationalism, Roman infallibility, and the *via media* of the Church of England. Befitting the gravity of the circumstances and the eternal weight of the results, they were grave – “our conversations always were serious,” Gladstone recalled.² The letters of Prime Ministers and Cardinals are naturally important, but these are full of worthy dreams.

One need not be a Victorianist to appreciate these letters. Scholars of Gladstone and Manning, of the Tractarian controversy, and of the Church of England, will of course relish the detailed unravelling of contemporary debates and the fine points of theology and personal temperament on which they turned. However, the correspondence also provide an intriguing case study in the nature of biography, involving

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questions of memory and self-deception; the imperfection of the means by which recalled experiences are conveyed; motivations that amplify, constrict, and distort those experiences; and the results that stem from willfulness and faulty human faculties. Seldom have two men so rigidly committed to truth and the ability to know it found it more difficult to reconcile their recollections. This correspondence can be read with equal profit by anyone interested in the nature of religious truth, in the relationship between faith and reason, in the claims of desire and obligation, in cultural precedent, or in vocation and calling. Having the full run of letters is particularly useful in tracing the complicated evolution of ideas and sensibilities, and in helping us better understand the forces of attachment, disagreement, and mistrust that developed over time between Manning and Gladstone, and that frequently emerge in our own close relationships.

Neither Manning nor Gladstone was easy to understand. They were sharp and intense, and required little more affirmation than their considerable gifts would naturally attract. They felt and fulfilled social obligations, but their pleasure lay in pleasing God and in satisfying themselves that they were doing so. Reading these letters, one is less surprised that the two separated than that they ever drew so close. We are here able to see both the "marked differences" that existed from the beginning of their relationship, and the ways in which these differences were masked for so long by powerful affinities, the evolving nature of the debate over the condition of the Church of England, and a wistful belief that their give and take was leading to a common destination. This all worked to preserve a sense of common purpose until the validity of the debate itself was called into question by Manning during the late 1840s.

During the 1830s, there was so much upon which Gladstone and Manning could agree. On the fundamental question of Erastian encroachment, they were champions of the Church. Writing in 1837, Manning asserted that "no recognition by the State can make a body to be a Church," and shuddered against the "gross, secular, worldly, infidel boast" of an omnipotent parliament (Manning to Gladstone, 28 April 1837). Gladstone

concurred, especially in the revulsion, and was already rehearsing in his correspondence arguments against state dominion that would be embodied in his *The State in its Relations with the Church* (1838):

The union is to the Church a matter of secondary importance. Her foundations are on the Holy Hills.... But the state, in rejecting [the Church] would actively violate its most solemn duty.... It is of more importance, therefore, for our interests as a nation, that we should sift this matter to the bottom, than for our interests as a church.³

They also agreed in God's sovereignty, in man's sinful nature, in the restorative role of the Church in society, and in the "consolation" to be found in "knowing that, the end of life is not happiness but usefulness" (Manning to Gladstone, 21 September 1837).

Manning and Gladstone occasionally disagreed. These differences, however, were accommodated within the context of scholastic debate, which required, in Walter Bagehot's formulation, reconciliation of "authorities vast in size, and scattered over centuries in time – with one another, with good sense, with the facts of special cases, with the general exigencies of the age."⁴ Their common Christian communion and belief in the saving and refining power of sacramental grace allowed a generous space for agreeable difference. This bond was enhanced by Gladstone's eagerness for "joint" actions, in which Christian friends frankly confessed their weaknesses, renouncing personal desires and submitting to the discipline of Christian accountability. Writing to James Hope in 1845, following his dearest friend's retreat from public life, Gladstone wondered, "Is rest in that department really favourable to religious inquiry?" "I would to God we could join hands upon a subject of the kind which interested you much two years ago."⁵ Gladstone found it necessary to use "a friend's liberty" with Hope, with Arthur Acland, with Walter James, to exhort them to sustained exertion on behalf of God and the nation. As one after another of these experiments failed or lapsed into comfortable good will – the Lay Engagement of 1837, the intense friendship with Hope by 1845, the new "Engagement" by the end of the 1840s

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– Manning increasingly appeared as the rare man whose life gives the lie to the notion that sinful sloth must win in the end.

As the years progressed, Manning became increasingly important to Gladstone from a personal point of view. Gladstone longed for someone to whom he might confess – the low feeling in time of trouble, the temptation to worldly standards, the struggle to know God's will. The day before his birthday in 1845, reflecting upon a series of Manning's sermons, Gladstone openly offered a "confession" to Manning:

You teach that daily prayers, the observance of fast and festival, and considerable application of time to private devotion and to Scripture ought not to be omitted e.g. by me: I am desirous really to look the question full in the face: and then I come to the conclusion that if I were to include the daily service now in my list of daily duties, my next step ought to be resignation. (Gladstone to Manning, 28 December 1845)

And Manning was just the man to hear his confession. Gently but firmly he addressed Gladstone's concerns and offered spiritual advice:

You have two things, especially to watch against and to counteract, one the tendency to forget yourself in external activity, and the other the hardening, and deadening effect of the intellect upon the soul, as for instance upon the sense of compunction, and perception of the tenderness of the love of God.... (Manning to Gladstone, 3 January 1846)

Manning was for Gladstone a true friend, one who disciplines rather than indulges, who could be trusted as much with the welfare of one's own soul as with the soul of the Church.⁶ Gladstone had written to his wife just two months earlier:

Of all the men we have in the Church of England Manning is the one to take the lead – he has not exactly Newman's peculiar gifts, but he has one which for a long time, not less than six or seven years, I have not

been able to find in N[ewman], or his immediate friends
– namely wisdom.⁷

What Gladstone did not know and Manning did not offer, was that Manning was at that very moment struggling with the seduction of pride and place, and with a fundamental belief in the validity of the English Reformation. That a struggling but faithful man might help his brother was perfectly consistent with their world of pious devotion, but Manning's reticence does suggest a lack of candor, and this Gladstone bitterly resented when Manning went over to Rome.

Manning was not alone responsible for the breach. Gladstone's fondness for Manning cast every indication of doubt in its best light, and he was willing to be persuaded that they were working in tandem. The letters suggest, however, that they were not, though this was not clear at the time. Gladstone continued to rely on him personally, which clouded his understanding of Manning's doctrinal movement. Gladstone wondered, for instance, whether he might be displeasing God in government service, an issue that he knew Manning had struggled with as a young man. Manning recognized Gladstone's political gifts and said so. And as long as Manning could remind him that one's work on God's behalf is mixed – "you went there with a view of your own, it may please God to keep you there for a purpose of His" – then Gladstone could be convinced that they were still pulling together (Manning to Gladstone, 2 April 1846).

The friendship was, nonetheless, odd and insular. First, the two rarely met. As a result, there was almost no social aspect to their relationship, and little opportunity for their concerns to be taken up in a broader sphere of public interchange. Second, they seldom discussed anything other than ecclesiastical affairs. In a sense, Manning was indulging Gladstone's half-hearted wish to leave politics, not by advising him to do so, but by creating with him an alternate world to which the busy politician might retreat. There was seldom a time, however, when Gladstone was not as busy with "practical" business as with the affairs of the Church, from his own railway, land, and industrial investments, to the widest variety of public business: tariff reform, railway legislation, revision of

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the Corn Law, Colonial self-government. This practical side of Gladstone rapidly developed after his appointment as Vice-President of the Board of Trade in 1841. As Colin Matthew acutely put it, there Gladstone began to realize "the beauty, joy, and technical satisfaction of departmental work," an area altogether outside his relationship with Manning, and virtually absent from the letters.⁸ No matter how extensive and forthright the letters may appear, the two friends are writing in caricature – Gladstone as penitent and exemplary Churchman; Manning as humble spiritual guide. Both were much more than their letters suggested.

It was odd, too, that Manning and Gladstone became so close, given their fundamental difference of opinion about the nature of the Church of England. The degree of divergence was so small at the beginning as to be barely perceptible, and certainly not large enough to constitute a disagreement in the 1830s. As challenges to the Church of England became more particular, however, arising from specific cases of Erastian interference with the authority of the Church, on the one hand, and from specific Romanizing interpretations of the validity of the English Reformation on the other, the contest increasingly was fought over principles in a particular context. As each man calibrated the extent to which principle might be compromised on behalf of God's Church, they drifted apart, though it was hard for them to see it as it was occurring.

Manning tended to dismiss rationalizing critiques in favor of the certainty of a heavenly sphere of activity that operated under special rules. Gladstone, on the other hand, found it difficult to reject an authoritative argument from any source. As Erb notes, Manning always tended to put "truth before practicality," which by the late 1840s was a problematic convention for Gladstone, who considered them to be inextricably bound. And we can now see more clearly that Manning's conception of "truth" was lodged in something higher than the Church of England. As early as 1833, Manning had already "rejected the whole idea of the Established Church," while Gladstone was seeing for the first time that the emergence of the Church of England was part of "a great incident in a continuous history ... necessarily like other great incidents marked with

agony, of a mixed character.”⁹ For Gladstone, God was the author of the circumstances themselves, however inexplicable they might appear to be. In response to W.A. Ward’s *The Ideal of a Christian Church* (1844), calling on Anglicans to be more Roman in their Catholicism, Gladstone observed that it was necessary for the Church of England “to deal with the people of England [...] adapting her modes of procedure to the national character.”¹⁰ Rushed to print in the *Quarterly Review* of December 1844, his instinctive response to Ward pointed away from Manning, though the divergence was subsumed for the moment in a subjunctive defense of the Church of England. Gladstone argued that nationality was fundamentally important to civic and religious integrity, an ongoing point of contention between Gladstone and Manning that emerged full-throated in the Vaticanism controversy of the 1870s. Gladstone supported Godly nationalism with historical precedent, arguing that in a nation like England, “with an unparalleled respect for law,” even “vicious precedents” became the “proper guarantees for the stability of truth.” In less than three years he was explicitly using such precedent – the “actual state of our laws and of the society in which we live” – as the foundation for political choices, many of them affecting the Church.¹² Gladstone’s willingness to look at the “actual state” of affairs was central to his gifts as a politician, but generally at odds with Manning’s idealism.

Closely related to Manning’s tendency to regard truth outside historical circumstance, was his search for “divine certainty,” a longing which helps to explain his growing attraction to Rome. One of the things that had most upset Gladstone about Ward was his recklessness in suggesting that one “who lives daily in the thought and fear of God” might know “without any admixture of doubt” the truth of “the various doctrines connected with the blessed Virgin,” as well as of “the Trinity, of the incarnation, and of its necessary complement the Eucharistic Presence.”¹² Manning clearly detested Ward’s lack of judgment, but said little about the dogmatic premise that had so galled Gladstone.¹³

From 1845, while Gladstone drew personally closer to Manning, he was indirectly but steadily fortifying himself against Manning’s appeals

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to idealism and certainty in Church affairs. Their intellectual separation was highlighted in November 1849 when Manning sent proofs for his sermon, "The Analogy of Nature," a frontal assault on Bishop Butler's case for the sufficiency of probability as a foundation of faith:

Because keen intellects rule among human reasoners, are they to be instructors of the Saints? Because natural truth is an uncertain light, may not the light of Christ be sustained by Himself infallible and clear? Surely all this is nothing less than to take nature without revelation as the measure and limit of Christ's presence and office in the Church. What is the Church of Christ in its first idea, but a supernatural economy, an order above nature; a creation which is in itself a miracle, in which the course of its proper nature is miraculous? By the very hypothesis, the analogies of this fallen world are excluded.¹⁴

Despite the heavy press of business, Gladstone rose to Butler's defense, and thus to his own:

You ask whether though natural truth be an uncertain light the light of Christ may not be infallibly clear? I answer you must shew me that the "uncertain" of natural truth pertains to what is weak and defective in nature – then I grant your argument, but at present I contend that much of the uncertainty on the contrary is among the proofs of Divine wisdom and the effective means of our training. (Gladstone to Manning, 14 November 1849)

Even in brief, this was a more reasoned response than his vehement expostulation against Ward, in part because he had studied the issue more carefully. After reading Ward, in 1845 he had renewed his study of Bishop Butler; and in the following year, when Manning finally decided against a published response to Newman's *Essay on Development*, Gladstone took up a refutation in earnest. Neither of these efforts led to an immediate publication, but in both cases the careful study affirmed both the utility of "probability" and the unwarranted pretension of Catholic "infallibility."¹⁵

Manning and Gladstone parted in 1851 over the question of spiritual authority, but they had differed on this point from the beginning of their relationship. In retrospect, it seems clear that only a fundamental change of perspective toward the nature of the Church of England by either Manning or Gladstone could have prevented their falling out, especially given the largeness of the question, the seriousness with which they viewed it, and the imperative call for action brought on by the Gorham decision. By then, however, Manning was convinced of the Catholic magisterium, while Gladstone could not, either then or in the future, admit to the “hopeless hostility between authority and reason” that was, in his mind, the dominant strain in Manning’s thought.¹⁶

Erb is right to point us toward the “early vocational choices” that played a part in framing the “theological and political formulations” of Gladstone and Manning, and thus the decisions they made. The theological emphasis of Gladstone’s letters to Manning often obscures the point that his instincts, as well as his first principles, were better suited to adaptive politics, and that by the mid-1840s flexibility and “ripeness” were at the heart of his approach to all issues. In his study of Butler, he found not only a defense against certainty, but a basis for its condemnation:

In the case of those whose minds are resolutely set on doing right, how many errors are committed from a want of that habit of mind which suspends conclusions until the case is ripe for decision. Indeed in the world at large suspense of judgment is constantly compounded with a skeptical temper, or is taken to indicate a mind wanting in vigour and determination. Pride revolts against what is certainly a confession of imperfection: and emulation often makes it difficult to refrain from the premature assumption of knowledge when others have perhaps already made it. But the man upon whose habits of thought Butler has once laid his strong and moulding hand, ought certainly to be secure against this form of error.¹⁷

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When Gladstone wrote to Manning in May 1872, suggesting that his "Pope" was Bishop Butler, he was formulizing a conviction that had, by the late 1840s, already provided him with the means of combining his first principles, his love of the Church of England, and his political instincts (23 May 1872). Gladstone didn't say it then – indeed, he did everything he could to deny it – but he was already beginning to sense what he finally confessed to Manning thirty years later: "Nature has made a mistake in one or other of us" (Gladstone to Manning, 22 January 1874).

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Notes

¹ D.W. Bebbington, *The Mind of Gladstone: Religion, Homer, and Politics* (Oxford UP, 2004), 6-7.

² Edmund Sheridan Purcell, *Life of Cardinal Manning*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1896), 1:570. On the "perplexity" of this period, see two superb biographies, James Pereiro's, *Cardinal Manning: From Anglican Archdeacon to Council Father at Vatican I* (Leominster, U.K.: Gracewing, 2008), 69-70, and H.C.G. Matthew, *Gladstone, 1809-1874* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 69-73.

³ Gladstone, *The State in its Relations with the Church*, 3rd. ed. (London: John Murray, 1839), 4.

⁴ Walter Bagehot, "Mr. Gladstone [1860]," in *Biographical Studies* (London: Longmans, Green, 1889), 98-99.

⁵ Gladstone to Hope, 7 December 1845, Hope Papers, National Library of Scotland 42259, f. 84.

⁶ In March 1848, Gladstone poured out his heart to Manning: the wearing anxiety of a bankrupt business venture, the strain of his daughter's life-and-death struggle, the ever-mounting impotence of the Church, and the weight of personal political attacks. Manning reassured him: "Though I could desire in one sense that my Friends might be free from such burdens and adversities, yet in another, and a higher I cannot wish them to lose their share in the best discipline of their life.... I must believe that the fears you have had to bear for your dear Child with all the anxieties which follow on

such an illness are full of beautiful and blessed chastisement” (Manning to Gladstone, 3 April 1848).

⁷ A. Tilney Bassett, *Gladstone to his Wife* (London: Methuen, 1936), 65-66.

⁸ Matthew, *Gladstone, 1809-1874*, 67.

⁹ Purcell, *Life of Manning*, 1:112; John Brooke and Mary Sorensen, eds., *The Prime Ministers' Papers: W.E. Gladstone, I. Autobiographica* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1971), 141-42.

¹⁰ Gladstone, “Ward's Ideal of a Christian Church” [1844], in *Gleanings of Past Years*, 7 vols. (London: John Murray, 1879), 1:171.

¹¹ Gladstone, *Substance of a Speech on the Motion of Lord John Russell ... with a view to the Removal of the Remaining Jewish Disabilities* (London: John Murray, 1848), 29.

¹² W.G. Ward, *The Ideal of a Christian Church* (London: James Toovey, 1844), 500.

¹³ Manning to Pusey, 5 March 1845, Manning Papers, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 654, ff. 356-57.

¹⁴ Henry Edward Manning, *Sermons*, 4 vols. (London: William Pickering, 1850), 4:166-67.

¹⁵ See Erb's thorough discussion of this exchange in the introduction to the letters. Gladstone's extensive work on Butler prior to 1850 can be found in Gladstone Papers, British Library (BL), Add. MS 44731, and in his “The Law of Probable Evidence and its Relation to Conduct,” written in 1845 but not published until 1879, and subsequently included in *Gleanings of Past Years*, 7:153-99; on Gladstone's response to Newman's *Essay on Development*, see Gladstone Papers, BL Add. MS 44736, and Andrew Armond, “Gladstone's *Via Media* Theory of Development,” herein.

¹⁶ Gladstone, *Vaticanism: An Answer to Replies and Reproofs* (London: John Murray, 1875), 119.

¹⁷ Gladstone, “Excursus Butleriana, Tentamente Butleriana,” Gladstone Papers, BL Add. MS 44731, ff. 66-68. For a discussion of how he subsequently made political use of Butler's “confession of imperfection,” see H.C.G. Matthew, *Gladstone, 1875-98* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 91-92.

